

Washington Times  
June 15, 2005

## **CAFTA and Democracy**

By Tom Davis

CAFTA, the Central American Free Trade Agreement, is more than just a pending trade pact. It's a signal of U.S. commitment to democracy and prosperity for our neighbors. And it's the best immigration, anti-gang and anti-drug policy at our disposal.

I recently returned from leading a congressional delegation to El Salvador, Venezuela and Colombia. The trip left me more convinced than ever that a large part of the answer to so many questions confronting the D.C. region and the entire United States is, quite simply, free trade.

Want to fight the ever-more-violent MS-13 gang activity originating in El Salvador but prospering in Northern Virginia? Pass CAFTA.

Want to begin to ebb the growing flow of illegal immigrants from Central America? Pass CAFTA.

Want to curb the still-steady stream of illegal drugs to American streets? Pass CAFTA.

Want to help make sure al Qaeda and other foreign terrorist groups don't easily utilize the southern border to enter the United States and do us harm? Pass CAFTA.

The reality is, CAFTA has profound implications for not only U.S. economic interests, but geopolitical and homeland-security concerns as well. My fear is that we are now so focused on promoting freedom and democracy in Iraq that we risk missing a critical and timely opportunity to further those causes in our own backyard — all because of some misguided but politically compelling opposition rhetoric.

U.S. sugar producers, labor unions and the environmental lobby are winning the war of words right now, but let's be real.

For example, I discussed the labor concerns with Salvadoran President Tony Saca, and he chuckled at the illogical nature of the criticism. "We have a profound respect for unions," he said. "But if we don't have more jobs, we won't have more unions. Because I haven't seen any jobless unions." Saca knows what opponents won't admit: the economic benefits arising from CAFTA would significantly increase wealth in El Salvador — wealth that will allow Mr. Saca to enforce existing, and even implement new, labor and environmental safeguards.

Each of the CAFTA nations is unique, but they share traits, including an urgent need for investment and jobs. Do we really think there is no connection between a lack of economic opportunity in Central America and illegal immigration to the United States? Or no connection between rising gang activity and poverty, underemployment and broken homes? Our own neighborhoods are not insulated from the lack of economic opportunity abroad.

Just as troubling is the potential for a spoonful of sugar to make this trade deal go down.

It's true that CAFTA would marginally — marginally — increase sugar imports to the United States from CAFTA countries, but we're talking about a spoonful per week per American, at most. The treaty calls for the gradual increase of sugar imports from 1.2 percent of current sugar consumption in the first year to 1.7 percent — over 15 years. The modest rise hardly would decimate this industry, which has been heavily protected by sweetheart trade rules and subsidies.

For U.S. economic interests, the gains are clear: U.S. exports to the six nations total about \$15 billion a year; that would increase by \$4 billion in the pact's first year, resulting in a net gain of about 25,000 U.S. jobs.

And, having seen the firsthand the growing hostility toward America in Venezuela under Hugo Chavez, I can only conclude that American national security interests are also at stake with CAFTA. While the collective attention of our nation has been primarily focused on Iraq, a string of troubling events has been unraveling in South America: economic collapse in Argentina; growing instability and leftist populism in Bolivia and Ecuador; Mr. Chavez consolidating power in oil-rich Venezuela, and extending his anti-U.S. influence into the Caribbean and across the Andes; and Brazil signing huge economic deals with China.

Meanwhile, the six CAFTA countries comprise some of our most reliable, steadfast allies anywhere. El Salvador, to this day, maintains hundreds of troops in Iraq in support of the U.S.-led mission.

Cuba's Fidel Castro and Venezuela's Mr. Chavez both vehemently oppose CAFTA because it would undercut their very real goal of fomenting socialist revolution across Latin America. If we fail to enact CAFTA, we play right into their hands, increasing both anti-American sentiment and China's growing clout in the region. Some say CAFTA is a move to ship U.S. jobs to Central America; in actuality, it offers a path toward importing apparel and other goods from Central American allies instead of China.

The CAFTA countries are dominated not by Chavez-like dictatorships with a "democratic" face, but by 21st-century leaders who realize that when people are given a larger economic role in their community, they in turn demand a greater role in how that community is governed.

But this rising democratic tide could be easily turned back unless Central Americans see — and see soon — that democracy delivers more than promises. The best way to make promises a reality for all is to open our doors to trade.

It may also be the best way to fight some of our biggest parochial problems.

*Rep. Tom Davis, Northern Virginia Republican, is chairman House Committee on Government Reform.*